

DEPARTMENT OF STATE

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Memorandum of Conversation

DATE: January 13, 1959

SUBJECT: Berlin and the German Problem.

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PARTICIPANTS: Herbert Dittmann, Under Secretary for Political Affairs,
German Foreign Office.

Wilhelm G. Grewe, German Ambassador
Mr. Livingston T. Merchant, EUR
Mr. Martin J. Hillenbrand, GER
Mr. Alfred G. Vigderman, GER

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Mr. Dittmann opened by saying he regarded the meeting as very private and informal and consequently he would speak frankly. He had learned only yesterday that he was to go to Washington. The Chancellor has been suffering from a cold for three weeks and is only in his office sporadically. The Chancellor's first idea had been to ask Grewe to return to Bonn but since it was important for Grewe to remain in Washington during this period he decided to send Dittmann.

Dittmann mentioned the letter from the Chancellor suggesting that the President ought not to receive Mikoyan. The situation had changed since the letter was sent and Dittmann did not yet know whether he was officially to deliver the letter to the Secretary. Mr. Merchant noted that the Secretary had sent the letter forward to the President for information.

Dittmann said that the Chancellor had been shocked by the latest Russian note and draft peace treaty. Even the Chancellor had not expected such a dreadful draft. The Russians formerly talked of concluding a peace treaty with a unified Germany. Their latest proposal suggests the peace treaty would be concluded with the two Germanies. Such proposal obviously involves the perpetuation of the division of Germany. We should give the Russians a flat refusal of their proposal, but at the same time we should press hard for negotiations. A Study Group in Bonn is examining the whole problem. This exercise should take between ten and fourteen days. Then the Germans want to come forward with their proposals on German reunification and European security. The Chancellor ardently desires the closest relationships with the United States in developing policy.

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Dittmann

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Dittmann went on to say that the Four Power Working Group which the British proposed be reconstituted should meet in Washington, not in Paris, and thereafter the four Western Foreign Ministers should confer in Washington in order to agree to the answer to give to the Russians. We need a real basis for negotiations, stating our maximum demands. When a draft is worked out the Chancellor wishes to discuss it first with the United States in order to be sure that there is no difference of opinion.

Mr. Merchant described his personal and immediate reaction as follows: There are dangers in stating our position in its maximum terms, thereby matching the extreme positions taken by the Soviets. Our public position should not be more extreme than the one we would be willing ultimately to agree on. A public statement engages our prestige. Any retreat would be interpreted as weakness. It is important to get the Russians to the conference table and one does not advance that prospect by confronting the world with unacceptable proposals on both sides, thereby creating a general impression of the hopelessness of negotiations. There are two reasons why we should get the Russians to the conference table. The first is to provide them with an escape route from the reckless position they have taken on Berlin. The second is that if the Russians are not ready to retreat, an early and vigorous effort to negotiate is essential to show that we were ready to exhaust all possibilities before we were confronted with a very serious situation. Mr. Merchant reviewed the notes thus far exchanged, pointing out that from them one can conclude that the West has an opportunity to involve the Soviets in a negotiation in which they will have to talk about the reunification of Germany.

Mr. Hillenbrand pointed to that part of the Soviet note expressing agreement to Four Power talks in advance of the peace treaty conference. If the problem of an agenda, and a formula for participation of the two Germanies could be worked out it should be possible to move forward to a conference.

At this point Ambassador Grewe emphasized that it was not really the German intention to propose extreme positions.

Mr. Dittmann said he couldn't tell yet how far the Germans were ready to depart from the proposals made at Geneva in 1955, but that it would help the Germans a lot to know where "your ideas are going". Mr. Merchant replied that the Geneva proposals were good, but the problem was to know how to modify them in order to improve our negotiating position, and we looked to the German Government to provide us with new ideas.

Mr. Dittmann agreed that the initiative was really with the Germans.

Reverting to the Four Power talks, Mr. Merchant said that while the subject would have to be discussed further it was his tentative view that we could agree to Four Power talks in Washington. He understood from Ambassador Alphand that the French were ready to work out a reply to the Soviet note in Washington. He thought that Foreign Ministers were so busy it would be better if their time could be saved. Conceivably a high-level working group could get the job done without bringing Foreign Ministers together.

Mr. Dittmann then said he thought the British were ready to meet in Washington.

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The question had been put to Ambassador Steel in Bonn, who seemed to agree. Mr. Dittmann said the Germans were thinking of the middle of February as a target date for a reply to the Soviet note.

Ambassador Grewe then raised the question of the Secretary's press conference of the day before. Mr. Merchant explained that when the Secretary said that he could conceive of German reunification by methods other than free elections, the Secretary meant that free elections are the obvious and natural way to reunification. Logically, however, it is not the only way. The example could be adduced of the thirteen original states of the United States which had come together without elections. Ambassador Grewe said that he understood, but he was sure the Secretary's statement would have its repercussions in Bonn, and perhaps a State Department spokesman should say something on the subject.

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